

Commission on Fatherhood Issues
Commission Meeting #1 – August 27, 2002

Meeting Summary

Members present: Sen. Michael J. McAlevee, Co-Chair ; Rep. Deborah L. Simpson, Co-Chair; Sen. Peggy Pendleton, Rep. Glenn Cummings, Rep. Marie Laverriere-Boucher, Emily Douglas, Ph. D.; Donald Farrell, Michael Heath and Heidi Leinonen.

Staff present: Phil McCarthy and Alison Ames.

Public present: Tom Chandel, Craig Ladd, Paul Carrier and Susan Cover.

1. Convening of the Commission. Sen. McAlevee and Rep. Simpson, Commission Co-chairs, welcomed Commission members, shared their thoughts on the work of the Commission and invited members to introduce themselves. Commission staff provided an overview of the enabling legislation, including the purpose, duties and directives delegated to the Commission.

2. Scoping Out Key Policy Issues & Developing a Work Plan. Commission members presented their perspectives on the key policy issues under study and identified resource people and the information needed to effectively examine key policy issues.

BARRIERS

Commission members began to identify the multiple barriers to fathers' involvement in the lives of their children and the significant personal, institutional, legal and cultural barriers to active, positive parenting by fathers. The Commission discussion is summarized below and including the following barriers:

Personal barriers.

- ♦ Father's literacy, educational attainment, personal development, job skills, employment, housing, child care, etc.;
- ♦ "Divorced Dads" book provided to Commission members also cited lack of transportation and increased commuting time to work as barriers;

Cultural barriers.

- ♦ Expectations regarding the roles that boys, men and fathers play in society, communities and families;
- ♦ Gender bias in societal expectations and roles of men as compared to women;

- ♦ “Father Facts” (written by Wade F. Horn, Ph.D.) from National Fatherhood Initiative includes a number of cultural factors that represent barriers to father involvement, including the incidence of non-marital childbearing, cohabitation and divorce and the implementation of government social welfare policies that provide disincentives to childbearing within a marriage and to encouraging two-parent families;
- ♦ A dearth of developmental opportunities to nurture boys and men and to cultivate caring and engaged fathers;
- ♦ Consider cultural barriers to positive parenting for prospective fathers, as well as barriers to parenting abilities of existing fathers;
- ♦ Male emotional development as a barrier . . . the only emotion encouraged for young men is anger; not helpful in nurturing loving relationships and the wide range of emotions necessary to have loving relationships;

Institutional barriers.

- ♦ Lack of respect for fathers contacting state agencies (gender bias or institutional bias);
- ♦ Portland Partnership study of fatherhood involvement found that schools are not welcoming to fathers and often overlook the primary or shared responsibility that fathers have for their children;
- ♦ Bias against men as prospective foster parents (e.g., presumption of low IQ);
- ♦ State government agencies and local education agencies often do not include contact information for fathers (including non-custodial fathers) in their information system's databases, thus preventing fathers easy access to information about programs and services and to be notified in the event of an emergency situation;
- ♦ Clarify education statutory requirement that schools provide notification to non-custodial parent, as well as the custodial parent;
- ♦ Inadequate resources to provide supervised visitation centers and services to enable non-custodial fathers to visit with their children;
- ♦ “Gender profiling” . . . we tend to lump fathers into one aggregate grouping (e.g., “out of wedlock” dads, “deadbeat dads” and “divorced dads”) . . . we need to have disaggregated data to be sensitive both good and bad aspects of fathers and fatherhood;

Legal barriers.

- ♦ Gender or institutional bias in our legal system, including our laws, government agencies and courts (i.e., Divorce and “parental rights and responsibilities” orders and “Protection from abuse” orders);
- ♦ Language as a barrier . . . we must be careful discussing “absent dad” or dad as a “visitor”; divorce decrees now use parenting time, contact schedule, custody time, etc.;
- ♦ Presumption of guilt against men in situations where protective orders are established;

- ♦ Statutes, regulations and legal notices are often written in a manner that is hostile to fathers and discriminatory;
- ♦ Inequitable treatment related to child support enforcement and visitation rights;
- ♦ The need for alternative approaches -- other than having to go to court -- to resolve disputes and problems in the areas of “parental rights and responsibilities”;
- ♦ Inequitable services and resources provided to mothers and fathers in custody cases (e.g., free legal counseling for mothers through Pine Tree Legal or Lawyers Project, but access is often not available to non-custodial fathers);
- ♦ Fathers are alone in addressing issues and concern; need father’s groups to provide advocacy and access to grants and resources to get through legal system during family difficulties.

Sen. McAlevey directed staff to invite Rep. Tessier to the next meeting to clarify his interest in this study and to clarify the barriers under consideration.

INFORMATION GATHERING & PREPARATION

Commission members discussed ways to learn the perspectives of the public, stakeholders, experts and interested parties. The Commission discussion focused on gathering information on the following:

- ♦ Violence prevention education -- domestic violence prevention is connected to bullying and school violence . . . interested in school-based education that can support boys to become nurturing fathers and move beyond notions of socializing boys to be “tough” and the “breadwinner”;
- ♦ Lack of resources -- need more resources for visitation center services . . . we see hundreds of individuals under protection through a protective order and we need greater access to supervised visitation services since kids want to visit with their fathers . . . both mothers and fathers are interested in having visits happen when the visits are safe and accessible;
- ♦ “Divorced dad” research shows them to be an unhappy lot (i.e., with the legal outcome, conflict with moms, etc.) . . . if dads are not happy this will impact children’s well being . . . need to look at divorce education programs and programs implemented in Maine jurisdictions and in other states;
- ♦ Gather state-by-state information on fatherhood initiatives through the National conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the Council on State Governments (CSG);
- ♦ Get National Fatherhood Initiative information from “Father Facts” on the importance of fathers in lives of their children;
- ♦ Invite resource people from the Men’s Resource Center;
- ♦ Consider inviting Mike Geanoulis, New Hampshire Chapter of National Congress of Fathers and Children;
- ♦ Invite resource people from a Maine-based Head Start program to describe fatherhood initiatives . . . Michael Knight, York County Heads Start, was suggested;

- ♦ Get copies of the “fatherhood kit” put together by the Massachusetts Children’s Trust Fund;
- ♦ Invite Staci Fortunato, Families First, Augusta and Shelly Cohen-Conrad, Kids First, Portland to learn about divorce education programs, Boot Camp for Dads program, etc.;
- ♦ Invite resource people involved with rape crisis prevention and intervention, sexual assault and bullying/teasing programming;
 - ♦ Invite Karen Westburg, Director, DHS Bureau of Children & Family Services;
 - ♦ Invite Aileen Fortune, University of Maine Extension Services, York County, to discuss research in the “gender project”;
 - ♦ Invite folks from Maine DOE to discuss school-based education and development initiatives;
 - ♦ Invite chief judge of district court or a district court judge to address gender bias, family rights and responsibilities and protective orders;
 - ♦ Collect information from NH court-ordered “child impact” seminar (i.e., basic information, evaluation, success rate;
 - ♦ Look into gender bias or barriers; also ask DHS about lack of access for fathers to programs and services;
 - ♦ Need to focus on “gender” identity and socialization processes;
 - ♦ Seek info from DHS on availability for TANF funds for fatherhood initiatives;
 - ♦ Seek statement of strong support for securing resources for DHS to pursue federal grants and other funds for protective services and visitation centers;
 - ♦ Establish a yardstick that safety of children is paramount and risks are not diminished.

Commissioners directed staff to invite the following to present information and discuss these issues at the next Commission meeting:

- ♦ Rep. Tessier – to clarify his interests;
- ♦ Men’s Resource Center – to discuss cultural factors involved in the socialization and development of boys and young men;
- ♦ Families First/Children First – to review divorce education initiatives;
- ♦ Head Start – to discuss father involvement in their programs; and
- ♦ DHS staff – to discuss information on TANF programs, grant funding and father involvement.

DECISION-MAKING & LOGISTICS

Commission chairs and members agreed to remain as informal as possible in proceeding with the study; and, while the Commission does not have the resources to hold public hearings around the State, Commission members agreed to involve the public and interested parties in the process as time allowed.

Commission members establish the following meeting schedule and directed staff to distribute a press release on behalf of the Commission:

Meeting Dates – Note: All meetings will be held from 9am – 4pm in CSOB #214

2nd meeting – Monday, September 16th

3rd meeting – Thursday, October 10th

4th meeting – Monday, October 28th *TENTATIVE*

3. Adjourn meeting. The Commission meeting was adjourned at 12:05 p.m.

Prepared and respectfully submitted by:

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